Watergate Impact: The Kremlin's Evidence

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In a column today on this page, Victor Zorza marshals persuasive evidence that President Nixon, by overstatements in his Oct. 26 press conference, may have pushed the Kremlin into its first public doubts about whether his political survival is either likely or desirable. The evidence suggests that the Russians, walking out a door carefully left open by Secretary Kissinger on Oct. 25 (the day of the alert of U.S. forces), eased off their indirect threat to intervene in the Mideast; Mr. Brezhnev quickly followed by reaffirming his personal commitment to detente. At his news conference of Oct. 26, however, Mr. Nixon portrayed the Soviet maneuvering as a threat which almost certainly would have materialized if he had not brandished "the power of the United States" by putting our forces on alert and responding with strong words. Mr. Brezhnev then angrily denounced the American alert and loosed the Soviet press to start discussing the chances of Mr. Nixon's impeachment.

What is most troubling about this sequence is that Mr. Nixon's contribution to it at his news conference seems to have had no real diplomatic purpose; rather his comments on his own diplomatic prowess came in the context of a claim to coolness under fire and of an argument that preoccupation with Watergate had not deterred him from dealing firmly with a foreign threat. He is entitled to high marks, pending disclosure of the full record, for meeting what seemed to be a dangerous crisis. But at his news conference, he did not have to make it seem that he had demanded and received a personal retreat by Mr. Brezhnev—and not for the first time—in the face of his own skill, boldness and determination. For if anything at all should have been learned from the long and nervous history of super-power confrontation, it is that direct challenges to national pride or leadership prestige on the other side should be avoided. In a word: no gloating—or boasting. This is the rule Mr. Nixon broke on Oct. 26.

That the Kremlin responded so sharply and that it promptly opened up public Soviet discussion of Mr. Nixon's possible departure from office does not mean, of course, that the Russians have given up on either Mr. Nixon or detente. It does mean the Kremlin has posted a clear warning that by its lights Mr. Nixon is not in all circumstances the indispensable man. Until now it has been at least plausible for the President to contend that his domestic woes had not influenced his capacity to conduct foreign policy. That contention is the weaker for his loose talk of Oct. 26.